

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT
NORTH ADAMS**

INFORMANT: RUTH A. BERNARDI

INTERVIEWER: SELMA SABIN

DATE: MAY 19, 1988

PLACE: SHIPPER'S OFFICE - HERITAGE PARK

S = SELMA

R = RUTH

SG-NA-T004

S: This interview for the "Shifting Gears, The Changing Meaning of Work in Massachusetts Project" is taking place in the shipper's office, Heritage Park in North Adams Thursday, May 19th, 1988. My name is Selma Sabin and I will be interviewing Ruth Bernardi, a former employee of Sprague Electric Company.

Ruth it is good of you to participate in the Sprague Electric Oral History Project and it is nice of you to be here with me today. To begin we would like to have a bit of your family background. Tell us about your grandparents and your parents and their names.

R: Well my grandparents were Edward Beals born of Petersburg, New York and my grandmother was Laura Grant Beals born in Berlin, New York. They lived after marriage in Berlin, Pownal and Williamstown. And he worked for the railroad, she worked as a housekeeper for Judge Tinney in Williamstown. Later she worked at the Windsor Mill and during the war worked at Sprague's.

S: And how many children did they have?

R: They had three. Two daughters and one son.

S: And your parents?

R: My parents were Charles O'Neill born in North Adams and Jessie Beals born in Berlin. They later lived in Pownal, Williamstown and North Adams. And he worked as a plumber and truck driver for the Pure Oil Company and she worked as a chambermaid at the Wellington Hotel. And during the war she worked at Sprague Electric.

S: Now your ethnic background of your grandparents and your parents, what church did you

attend?

R: Um, well they claimed they were Yankees. [Chuckles] [S: yes] Certainly going back to the Indians, both. Um, and I have forgotten what other question you asked. Oh, I was brought up as a Roman Catholic.

S: And how many children in your family?

R: Uh, there were five of us. Two, I had two brothers and two sisters.

S: And their names?

R: Walter O'Neill, Charles O'Neill, Margaret McClellan and Agnes Booth.

S: And where do you? Are you the youngest?

R: No, I am second oldest.

S: Second oldest. And the order you gave me was top down? [R: no] No?

R: No it wasn't. [S: No] Uh, do you want me to?

S: Yes, please.

R: Okay. Walter was the oldest, then myself. Agnes Booth was third. Charles was fourth and Margaret was fifth.

S: And did you grow up in this area?

R: Yes. I was born in Williamstown, but grew up in North Adams.

S: And why did you um, [whispers: no, that is not true] (--) Tell me about your schooling.

R: Well I attended Saint Joe's School for ten years and a year and a half at Drury. I went there in the junior year.

S: And how old were you when you left Drury?

R: Uh, seventeen.

S: Seventeen. And had you worked while you were going to school? Or when did you start your work experience?

R: That is when I started working at age seventeen. I was a senior at Drury at the time. And that is when I left school.

S: Yes. And you have been married how many years?

R: I have had two marriages. [S: Yes] I was married in 1940, had one child and was divorced and remarried in 1945 and had two sets of twins with my second marriage.

S: Um, yes! Then you have five children?

R: I have five children.

S: Yes and your second husband, is he Dennis?

R: No, [S: no] my second husband is Dominique.

S: Dominique.

R: Dennis is my son, the older.

S: Oh, I see. The telephone number is Dennis and Ruth?

R: Because I was having problems with calls. My husband is deceased.

S: Um, your husband is deceased.

R: Yeah, he passed away at age fifty-one.

S: What kind of work did he do?

R: He was a steamfitter for Sprague.

S: Now why did you go to work at Sprague Electric?

R: Well I think it was the place to work at the time. And uh, we felt (--)

S: Were there any other family members working at Sprague's. Any of your?

R: Not at the time I went in, but later Walt, my brother Walt went there and my sister Agnes went there. My sister Margaret went there and of course me. And then during the war as I said, my mother and my grandmother worked there.

S: That would be in the forties?

R: Yeah. And then during summer vacations two of my boys, Dennis and Ronnie worked.

S: Well that brings us in to the later years. [R: Umhm] Well we are back here in 1938, 39. [R: Okay] Can you recall the job you had in the beginning and a typical day, or what you recall of your earlier experiences as a Sprague Electric employee?

R: Well I went in in 1939, in the fall and I went into a PAA Department, did [stove?] soldering, which consisted of soldering a wire to each end of a unit which had been rolled to make a condenser. We went in at 4:00 and got out at 10:00 at night.

S: Yes. Did you have any special training for this kind of work?

R: No, no.

S: Did you in your years at Sprague, did you rise and promote? Did you get promotions, or pay increases?

R: Well we got pay increases. I can't call them promotions, [S: umhm] but pay increases which, well were always negotiated through the unions.

S: Was the work force primarily men or women?

R: Well when I first went in I think it was always more women, but there were quite a number of men there at the time. This was before (--)

S: How were the working conditions?

R: I never found the working conditions too bad myself.

S: Were the women treated equally and if the men were doing the same kind of work did you have equal pay? Equal benefits?

R: No we didn't.

S: No.

R: No we didn't. Men were paid for the same job um, a little higher than the women. Of course that was always a gripe we had, but [S: rightly so] until more recently.

S: Then your experience at Sprague goes back almost fifty years and pay scales then must have been quite different.

R: I believe, I believe I started at .41 cents an hour, because I worked thirty hours and I think that I was getting 12.40 a week.

S: How did you find your fellow employees?

R: Overall I liked just about everybody I worked with.

S: Well there was good interactions and friendships developed?

R: Yes, yes. I have some very dear friends who I met in Sprague's and still keep up with them. And uh, I think overall most of the people got along. There were gripes like anyplace else.

S: How about management?

R: Well, I didn't have problems myself with management so I couldn't say too much about that. I think I was treated pretty well at Sprague's.

S: In your term there do you remember any strikes, or union activities?

R: Yes. I am not familiar with the earlier strikes, but I remember the 1970 one. I was out of work for both of their strikes. [S: Oh] So I didn't participate in either of those.

S: Yes. You don't remember the ones in the 40's then?

R: No. I knew there were strikes, but I was not working at the time so.

S: Yes. Now you were married in 1940. Did your work affect your marriage at all do you think?

R: Uh, no, but uh, when I, I left work you know, before my son was born and that is why I was out during the 41 strike. [S: Yes] And um, in 45 I believe I had over stayed a leave and lost my seniority. [S: Umhm] So I was out of work at that time.

S: Now if you were seventeen in 1938 would you have any recollection of the depression years?

R: Not really. I couldn't remember them as depression years. I mean we were all, in our area we were all sort of equal. Nobody had that much anyway. So we didn't feel as though there was a depression.

S: And during the war, during the war years how did the work differ?

R: Well we had different lines of work [S: umhm] as well as you know, the usual lines, but we did begin making the uh, having a bomb department and gas mask department. So there were different lines of work than what we had been use to.

S: Did you find that your, your responsibilities changed, or your assignments, or your pay scale, or your hours? Was it affected by the war effort?

R: Uh, yes. You could just about work any hours that you wanted to. And we did take advantage of that. Um, some worked less hours, because they were glad to keep you as an employee at that time, and some worked more. Um, I think some of them worked less hours because they could get a babysitter for a shorter period of time.

S: Then as you recall most everybody was working and there was no difficulty in finding employment, but after the war ended how did your situation change?

R: Mine didn't change. [S: No] As far as mine went it didn't change. Um, I still kept the same jobs that I had and was not laid off.

S: And at that time you had a family. [R: Yes, umhm] And you continued working? [R: Yes] It didn't change your life style in any way. You continued working. [R: Yes] And the job was there. [R: Umhm] [Long pause]

R: Then tell me some more about your, the work you did. Did you enjoy the work?

R: Yes I did enjoy the work, most of the jobs. There were a few that I wasn't crazy about.

S: Tell us about the jobs.

R: Um, well we did some machine welding, which isn't as difficult as it might sound. It was a small machine and we welded small wires to the units. Um, then I worked in the aging department where we built testing boards for the other depart, for the other departments to um, test their units on. And um, my last employment was um, in the metalized department where I was re-role operator, which meant correcting mistakes that the slitters had made on metalized paper.

S: Why did you never choose to uh, seek employment in any other industry?

R: I think mainly because I was always happy with my work at Sprague's. And I liked the idea of the second shift, which was good for my family. My husband worked first shift and he came home before I left.

S: What were those hours? What was the first shift and the second shift and the third shift?

R: Well he worked 7:00 to 3:45. [S: Yes] Although he was on call 24 hours a day at which time he would bring my sister over and she would babysit. And I went in at 5:00 to 11:00 most of the time. [S: Umhm] But then later we did have to take a day shift job if we were laid off from the nights.

S: Then on which of these job assignments did you stay the longest since your experience is so vast, in which job do you recall staying?

R: I stayed about seven years I believe in Sprague products, which was a subsidiary of Sprague's, which later became a department itself.

S: And what did you do there? What was a typical day at uh, your desk or your table?

R: It was not a desk it was a table. [R: Yeah] And um, my last years there was putting up small orders for (--)

S: And that would be toward the end of your, before your retirement? Is that (--) What was the

last job you had there?

R: The last job I had was the re-role operator in the metalized department. That was the re-role machine that would correct. If a slitter made a role too big or too small, I would slit it into another size. And that was about seven years of that as well as inspection along with that.

S: And where was this operation? Which plant?

R: Well when I first went in it was at Beaver Street. It was the last department in Beaver Street. And uh, then we moved to Brown Street. And I, when I left we were at Brown Street.

S: When you left you were at Brown Street. Would you say that from the beginning of your experience at Sprague's to the end, to the time of your retirement you had developed a skill? And what, how did it differ from the skill that you had when you first began working as to the job you had to do when you retired? The dexterity or the know how of doing what you were doing, was there a vast difference in the task that you began your work in 1938 to the time of your retirement?

R: It was a different type of work altogether, but there was I don't think any skill in any of the jobs I did.

S: Well there is I might say, there is a skill in that you had the dexterity certainly to do what you did.

R: I enjoyed going to the different departments and learning all of these jobs. I never did have any difficulty in learning any of them.

S: How do you uh, did you feel about the health and safety conditions in the workplace?

R: Well I didn't find any problem with, with safety as such in there. Uh, we did have OSHA come in every once in awhile and talk to us. And I guess they checked over conditions, which I am not that familiar with what they did do, but I never really had a problem as far as safety.

S: I would say you were a very good employee at Sprague Electric.

R: I enjoyed it!

S: Will you uh, did you get a twenty-five year pen, or?

R: Uh yes I did.

S: You did? [R: Yes] Did you get a gold wristwatch?

R: Yes I did.

S: Nice. [R: Yeah] Then you are a member of the Quarter Century Club?

R: Yes.

S: You are a very distinguished employee. What um, tell me about your friendships that developed at Sprague's.

R: I made many valuable friendships. And uh, I don't know.

S: Did you get together during the breaks or during lunch hour?

R: Um, well our lunch hours were, were a lot of food. That was one of our I guess you would call it hobbies, or whatever. Each person would bring in a different dish on different days and that was, took up quite a bit of our lunch hour, breaks and such.

S: Where did you take these lunch hours and breaks?

R: We had a cafeteria.

S: You would go down to the cafeteria?

R: Yes we would go down to the cafeteria for our lunch hours. For our breaks, we didn't have that much time. Supposedly ten to fifteen minutes.

S: Then your, and now your own family, your son was an infant and a youngster and you were working. Did you have any childcare problems?

R: No I didn't, because uh, at first I had my sister as a babysitter. I never had outside babysitters. And later as I say, I was second shift so my husband was my babysitter.

S: And with the twins, the two sets of twins, you had family assistance then?

R: Uh, yes I did. I had uh, a cousin's daughter was the only babysitter other than my husband and my sister.

S: How long did your husband work at Sprague's. Was he a long time employee?

R: Uh, yes. He worked from about 1938 I believe he went in and worked until his death in 51, let's see. Eighteen years uh, seventeen years ago. [Whispering out her thoughts.] Seventy-one I think.

S: In 1971. How old was your husband when he past away?

R: He was fifty-one years old.

S: Was his death in any way connected with his occupation?

R: Uh, he had a heart attack and I, I don't believe it was connected. He had, his family had, most all died with a heart attack, or heart problems. So I don't think that it had much to do with employment.

S: Was he working up until the time he had the attack, or had [few words unclear]?

R: He had had an attack uh, the Thanksgiving time the previous year. And he had just gone back to work for one week, limited work, and he past away on the Saturday.

S: That is too bad. That is sad. Then you continued working for ten years after his death?

R: Yes I did.

S: And your children were grown of course by then.

R: Yes.

S: Where do your children work? What kind of (--)

R: Um, one is uh, carpetman. He is rug and carpet. And uh, one is a postman with the North Adams Post Office. [Long pause] [S: Yes] Uh, one (--)

S: What is his name?

R: Dennis. Uh, no Ron. Ronnie is the postman. He does deliver in Williamstown at times. Um, and uh, Ricky was the carpetman. Ronnie is the mailman. Dennis is a builder of homes. Uh, Donna works at um, Plastics in GE.

S: Then your and uh, that is four.

R: That is four. And uh, Billy works for The Community Action in Adams.

S: Then you have four sons and one daughter. [R: Yes] And none of them had any Sprague Electric experience, [R: yes] or did they?

R: Yes, they did. Dennis and Ronnie worked summers during school um, for the maintenance department. Their employment came through their father's seniority. This was how they were hired then. The uh, oldest employee's children got into the maintenance first during the summers, such as washing windows, any little thing. And uh, later Ronnie was the only one who went to Sprague to work. Uh, he went in as a computer operator. And until they moved to Mansfield, and after which time he went into GE as a computer operator. Was laid off from there with the last [S: cutback] cutback. And then he went into the Post Office.

S: Then your children have all stayed in the northern Berkshire area? They haven't left the area?

R: Uh, my daughter left. She lived in Texas for a number of years. Uh, she lived in Colorado

for awhile. Then she returned back here uh, about five years ago and went to the GE.

S: How did work, work at Sprague's differ in the 50's, 60's and 70's to time in the 40's?

R: Uh, I think the number of employees was growing all the time. Um, I think at the time of the strike we had about thirty-nine to 4,000 employees.

S: You are talking about the strike in the 70's

R: 70's, in the 70's yes.

S: Yes.

R: Um, after the strike it was, I think down to about 3200. Having moved Union Street out first and then dwindling, I think now there is about 400 Sprague employees. That is my guess. Uh, and 200 at the Brown Street uh, Sprague Commonwealth, which is a spin- off of Sprague. [S: Now] Now. [S: Yes]

S: During the 1970 strike were you at all involved in union activities?

R: Um, not at the time. I was a steward with both unions, the ICW #2 and uh, the IUE, but very short term with both. It just was not my thing.

S: You didn't like confront (--). Were there confrontations?

R: Uh, yes and uh, I think it, it caused hard feelings to be a steward.

S: Among, among the employees, your friends?

R: Well among the, yes, yes among the friends, because if you came up with a grievance someone had to win, someone had to lose. And it just was not my thing to get into.

S: How long did you uh, act a a steward? Was it a short (--)

R: Very short. [S: Very short] I think with the ICW it was probably about three months. And I don't even think I stayed a month with the IUE.

S: But being a steward to me would indicate that you were popular with your fellow workers. You would have to be elected to that post, wouldn't you?

R: Yes, you did have to be.

S: Then you were well liked and popular.

R: Well, by some. [Laughs]

S: You retired? Am I correct in using that term? [R: Um] You retired from Sprague's in 1981.

R: I retired because of um, arthritic disability. That is why I retired at that time.

S: And uh, the retirement benefit program, was it adequate?

R: Um, well what um, with um, social security and our pension I think, I believe at the time I retired we were getting \$9.00 for each year of service that we had with the company.

S: As a lump sum?

R: No, monthly.

S: Monthly, \$9.00.

R: For each year of service.

S: So that if you had 27 x 9 let us say?

R: Yes, umhm.

S: \$243.00?

R: \$243.00 is what I got for a pension monthly.

S: In 1981?

R: Umhm, which is (--)

S: Do you consider that adequate?

R: Well at the time I guess it was, but it is higher now. It's uh (--)

S: In 1981, which is just a short seven years ago.

R: Um, well as far as Sprague's go [S: yes] I guess it was um (--)

S: Was the retirement program a contributory one, or just you contributed to it all the years that you worked?

R: Uh, we contributed to it, but um, not all the years that we worked. We didn't have a plan in the beginning. I don't remember when the plan went into effect, but we, we contributed and the company contributed.

S: And in your own case you would consider this adequate and fair.

R: At the time I would.

S: And now?

R: Uh, well now I don't know what it is. I know it (--)

S: But now?

R: It has [S: oh] you know, the amount has gone up. I don't know what they are getting per year now.

S: I thought you meant when you were saying now, in retrospect you don't think it was adequate. You were satisfied with what benefits you received.

R: I was satisfied with the benefits that I received, but uh, there is nothing in it as far a inflation goes. That is my main gripe, because now I think it should have gone up, you know.

S: Cost of living.

R: Yes, which it has now, but it has been negotiated. So what they are getting per year now, I don't know.

S: Do you recall when you were a steward, or anytime in the union negotiations did the union try over the years to have a cost of living increase in retirement benefits? Were these the type of proposals that the management did not agree to in negotiations?

R: Well I think the only things that I can remember being negotiated as far as the pension went was uh, it was raised every year, but I don't think there was anything as far a cost of living. There was cost of living clauses as far as raises went in your actual pay, but no cost of living as far as the pension plan.

S: Then you were age sixty on retirement?

R: Close, yes.

S: Had it not been for an arthritic condition and of course taking into consideration the cutbacks in the employment number, would you have chosen to remain an employee of Sprague's?

R: No. I intended to get out at sixty. [S: Yes] As a widow I could get social security. So I did think about it. I hadn't fully made up my mind, but I was thinking seriously of retiring at sixty.

S: Your arthritic condition, would you, was it in anyway connected with the work you did?

R: Well uh, my problem, my main problem was my hands, which you can't do much without the use of your hands. So I could not keep up my machine work at all.

S: Would it have been aggravated by, or caused by the work you did? [Few words unclear]

R: No. [S: Umhm] No, I don't think so, because I did have arthritis since I was twenty-two.

S: Of the working conditions of all those years, on and off that you worked, time out to raise a family, you were seventeen to begin, were there working conditions, healthy condition, dry conditions, or the spaces that you worked in, you say OSHA would come in, but uh, can you remember if there were any conditions that weren't good. Uncomfortable as far as temperature or humidity, dampness or crowding.

R: Not as far as any of the jobs I had went. In fact I think uh, some of the jobs were helpful, as stove soldering. There was a lot of heat, which was good for the hands. [S: Yes] Um, and I think that um, I did have um, a clause in my files that if I couldn't stand I would be put on another job. So I don't think that you know, my work affected my condition.

S: Yes. Why do you think you were so uh, content is maybe not the right word, but why do you think you were satisfied to work at Sprague's? What do you think were one or two of the main reasons why you looked forward to going to work each day?

R: Most days. [Laughs] [S: Most days] Um (--)

S: Aside, well the principle reason for going to work is?

R: The money.

S: The money. Yes that is the factor. [R: Yeah] But what other motivation was there for you to continue for a career like that?

R: Well I think that um, my husband and I were both satisfied with what we were doing and it was good for the children. Our hours were good for the children. And I think we gave them a pretty good life. So what else is there?

S: Umhm, yes. Those are all very positive points.

R: And at times it was relaxing to go in and get away from the children. [Chuckles]

S: How do you mean that?

R: Well after a day with five children it was nice to leave them up to their father and get away.

S: Get away and have lunch with the girls.

R: Yes, and I enjoyed many friendships in there.

S: What are some of the things you would share with your co-workers?

R: Um, well we use to have little clubs in there. You would put maybe fifty cents a week in a kitty and then as that grew big enough you would go out for lunch, go out for dinner, or whatever. [S: Umhm] And um, we did have parties. We had Halloween parties and Christmas parties and such. And uh, bowling team.

S: You had a bowling team?

R: Yeah, which I couldn't participate in too much. [Chuckles] I tried it, but it didn't work out for me.

S: Because of the time, or the physical?

R: No, because of [S: condition] my condition.

S: Yes. [Long pause] Then in hindsight would you have done things differently if you had a choice? If you had it to do over again?

R: I don't know that I would have done anything different. I um, the only thing would have been going on to school, which was not for me because my family, my mother did not have the money to, to send us on further. So there was not too much choice but to go to work.

S: Yes.

R: My father died when we were very young. My mother raised us alone. So keeping us through high school was quite a chore for her. [Long pause]

S: And management at Sprague's, you had a good relationship with management? They knew you. They knew they could depend upon you.

R: I never had a problem really [S: yes] with management.

S: Were you ever laid off?

R: I was laid off many times.

S: You were?

R: Many, many times and this is why I worked for so many different foreman. Because if you worked on, especially on a second shift you were laid off. Uh, you might go into a department for some time as little as three weeks [S: really] and be laid off again, or be transferred to another department. I was laid off many, many times.

S: What would cause the layoffs?

R: Well, the end of orders really. They would you know, call quite a crew in to get an order out in a hurry and then there was no more work in that department.

S: How did they determine who gets called, or who gets laid off?

R: Well after uh, the first unions came in it was always by seniority.

S: What year did they first become unionized? Do you recall?

R: I don't remember. I know when I went in they were not unionized. And then along came an ICW #1, which I don't remember at all. And uh, I don't know what year ICW #2 was uh, came into being.

S: How did things change when there was a union? Can you recall any particular things that improved greatly?

R: Uh, yes. I can recall one thing. You didn't get sent home for um, if you went in in the morning and you ran out of work, in the very early years you would be sent home and possibly called back later in the day to come in and do some more work. That never took place after the unions were in.

S: Yes. How did the work force respond to unionization? Were they in favor?

R: I think most people realized you needed a union to keep things anywhere near fair. And uh, but I don't know that everyone thought that they needed the IUE. I don't.

S: Well what is the IUE? What would they have if not that union? [Comment unclear]

R: Well before that it was the ICW #2, which was an independent union.

[Tape shuts off and begins again with interviewer explaining the problem].

S: Inadvertently the recorder was not connected properly and so any further conversation, information from the interview was not taped. However it is my feeling that most of the points were covered in the previous forty minutes. And so this is the end of the interview. Thank you.